

# Bertrand russell's 'a free man's worship' essay



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Bertrand Russell: 'A Free Man's Worship' Russell's essay begins with Mephistopheles' story of the creation - God is bored (and also feeling a little vindictive?) so decides to create the World! Note the 'evolutionary' conception of the creation of humans: 'from the monsters ... Man was born' with the 'power of thought' (whence 'good' and 'evil?') 'All is passing in this mad, monstrous world', humans must snatch their brief moment of bliss while it lasts! There must be some purpose in this world - but nothing in REALITY seems worthy > whence God???

Humans discern 'purpose' by trying to sift out the 'good' from the 'bad'; that is, prising order out of the jaws of chaos. In the beginning, Humans inherited 'sin' from their fellow creatures (animals) - the brute beasts of prey. Bad events were interpreted as God's punishment for our sins. Only by appeasing God could we alleviate these punishments (= repentance) - we embraced self-sacrifice, practised asceticism, renounced pleasure (!) Contrition was 'rewarded' by annihilation.

Science paints a similar picture, highlighting the randomness of events preceding Man's 'creation' (an 'accidental collocation of atoms') Whatever our endowments from Nature, we are doomed to extinction as the Universe dies (Doomsday Scenario). These are the proposed 'facts' which underlie our existence, the background against which our lives unfold. How can we survive in such a world? Because, despite its 'blind' machinations, Nature has somehow or other managed to create human beings - creatures with reason & insight.

With such ' gifts' we are ' free' to critique & create - unlike ' lesser' animals. So, we might be impotent in the face of Nature's forces but we are superior in terms of our ability to oppose and thereby liberate ourselves from them. We can still assert our free spirit in defiance of the relentless processes of Nature. The ' savage' on the other hand has no independence of thought (while subject to the same oppression as humans). The early history of the savage is that of slaves who cringe before the gods (cf. Moloch? ) and worship their power (because they lack power themselves? This worship of power manifests itself in the story of Job: the power (and ruthlessness) of God, as witnessed in the ' rough justice' meted out to Job, invites the question ' Should we worship power or goodness? ' At this point Man's ' true freedom' appears: ' to worship only the God created by our own love of the good. ' The claims of Morality thus outweigh fear or infatuation with power. [The story of Job presents a problem for Christians: where is the Goodness which supposedly is at the heart of the nature of God? ]

In modern society life is a constant struggle to survive - with those who do survive being morally vindicated (and, presumably the methods they employ in their survival? ) Some people continue to fall back on God as the synthesis of what is and what should be: Idealism and Reality (' facts') are ONE. But the world of Fact is NOT good (Problem of Evil? ) Meanwhile, the masses still respond with wishful thinking, or resentment (a ' fierce hatred of the gods'); although such ' indignation' is futile - a ' submission of our Reason (thoughts) but not of our desires'.

What Russell advocates is a sort of ' Stoic freedom' which liberates human beings from ' non-human' powers, such as our desires, while retaining the

wisdom of our thoughts and promoting such things as art, beauty and philosophy (! ) which dignify and distinguish the human race. Respect for truth, beauty, and ideals - these are what the free Man should revere (even if Nature is contrary in its actions). The liberation of thought from 'eager wishes' (self-interest? ) is necessary to achieve 'unfettered contemplation'. While we are not free in action or desire we are so in thought.

Yet true freedom is only possible when we no longer expect of life that it provides us with 'personal goods' that are mutable (perishable over time). And when we renounce those animal-like emotions (rage, resentment, indignation, and so on) which hold us in intellectual bondage if we succumb to them. Russell, then, turns to the Stoic doctrine of resignation (which morphs into a kind of Christian renunciation? ) By renouncing the 'non-human' world, and accepting the 'rule of Fate', we can fashion or re-create our own world.

This new world is in thrall to our imagination (so it is we who are in power, now? ) Russell also praises tragedy, 'the proudest and most triumphant art' (cf. Nietzsche? ), so described because it offers supreme insights in even the darkest moments. Even in the spectacle of Death, 'there is an overpowering awe, a feeling of the vastness, the depth, the inexhaustible mystery of existence.' And we are adrift in the Universe like Huck Finn on his raft, untethered from 'temporary' desire, the petty and the trivial things of everyday life, floating on the dark ocean.

The single soul, tossed and tormented, struggles against the whole weight of an indifferent universe, and in the process wisdom and compassion are born.

Also, by taking into our heart the overwhelming forces of the universe, to experience them and to know them, is to conquer them. So, ' to abandon the struggle for private happiness, to expel all eagerness of temporary desire, to burn with passion for eternal things - this is emancipation. ' And this is the free man's worship.